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**NOAA FISHERIES SEEKS COMMENT ON DRAFT PLAN TO REDUCE DEATHS OF
ATLANTIC BOTTLENOSE DOLPHINS IN FISHERIES**

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries), an agency of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), is developing a plan to reduce injuries and deaths to Atlantic bottlenosed dolphins caused by fishing gear in federal waters of the Mid and South Atlantic. NOAA Fisheries is seeking comment on the scope of the issues to be addressed in a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

"Our goal is to reduce the number of dolphins that are injured or die due to fishing gear interactions without causing undue hardship to commercial fishermen. We want to do that with the public's help," said Georgia Cranmore, Chief of NOAA Fisheries' Southeast Regional Protected Resources Division. "We believe public participation is essential to the successful implementation of the take reduction plan. We've met with many people about this since last year and hope many more will take advantage of the opportunity to express their views on the scope of the draft EIS."

NOAA Fisheries convened a Bottlenose Dolphin Take Reduction Team in November of 2001 under the marine mammal protection act (MMPA) that requires protection of marine mammals during fishing activities. The team consists of more than 40 stakeholders including those in the commercial and recreational fishing industry, the conservation community, federal and state governments, academic and scientific organizations, fishery management councils, and interstate fisheries commissions. The team was formed to develop recommendations to reduce the frequent and well-documented deaths and injuries of bottlenose dolphins.

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NOAA Fisheries believes the long-term survival of Atlantic coastal bottlenose dolphins could be compromised because of interactions with several types of commercial fishing gear, including:

- Mid-Atlantic coastal gillnet;
- North Carolina inshore gillnet;
- Southeast Atlantic gillnet;
- Southeastern U.S. Atlantic shark gillnet;
- Atlantic blue crab trap/pot;
- Mid-Atlantic haul/beach seine;
- North Carolina long haul seine;
- North Carolina roe mullet stop net; and
- Virginia pound net.

“All the team’s meetings were open to the public and they heard from concerned citizens after each meeting,” said Cranmore. “We also held three public meetings that were specifically designed to solicit public comments, and the public can still give us written comments on the scope of the draft EIS. Once the proposed rule to implement the take reduction plan is ready, we’ll let the public know so that they can provide feedback on it as well.”

The MMPA requires that the incidental mortality and serious injury of western North Atlantic coastal bottlenose dolphins due to commercial fisheries must be reduced to below potential biological removal levels within six months of the Bottlenose Dolphin Take Reduction Plan’s implementation. Potential biological removal levels are unique to each species and are the number of animals that can be removed from the population without affecting the status of that species.

NOAA Fisheries announced its intention to prepare an EIS for the Bottlenose Dolphin Take Reduction Plan and to solicit public comments on the EIS’s scope by publishing a notice in the *Federal Register* on July 22, 2002 (67 FR 47772).

For more information on the Notice of Intent to prepare an EIS, contact: Katie Moore, NOAA Fisheries, Southeast Region, 727-570-5312 or Emily Menashes, NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources, 301-713-2322. Comments on the scope of the EIS must be postmarked or transmitted by facsimile by 5 p.m., EST, on August 21, 2002. Written comments may be sent to: Chief, Marine Mammal Conservation Division, Office of Protected Resources, National Marine Fisheries Service, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910, Attn: Bottlenose Dolphin EIS; or faxed to 301-713-0376.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation’s living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries, please visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>.